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Andy R. Furrill
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Maude L. Lowe
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3/19/03
(Date)

AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

CONDUCTED BY: AMBER TURRILL

INTERVIEWEE: MAUDE LOWE

DATE OF INTERVIEW: MARCH 19, 2003

[NOTE: The interviewers questions/comments are in BOLD print]

Okay, we're ready. I am Amber Turrill, and I am here today interviewing Maude Lowe, otherwise known as Aunt Martha. How are you today?

Well, I'm fine. How are you?

I am fine and well. Okay. We'll start out by asking you a little bit of biographical information about yourself. Around...what is your birthday basically? Around what time were you born?

Oh, that's a hard question. [laughing] I used to lie about my age, Amber, but I just don't tell it any more.

Okay, that's fair enough, fair enough. Where did you grow up?

Woodlawn, Virginia. A little wide spot in the road called Woodlawn, Virginia.

A wide spot in the road?

Yes.

Why do you say it's a wide spot in the road?

There's just nothing there. [laughing] There was a store. They carried Arbuckle Coffee. And I bet you never heard of that.

No.

Let's see. They had what we call blue jeans, they were overalls. That's what we called them back then. And of course, they had a bib to them. And uh, I could smell kerosene oil. They sold that. You could smell it when you walked in the store. They also had candy, like peppermints and all kinds of neat, pretty colored candy. Have you ever seen one of these bowls, big old bowls with [inaudible] you reach in, you know, and you get your candy like that. We carried eggs to the store. I mean, after my mom and dad would make a list of everything they thought I should get out of a dozen eggs. Then they'd tell me I could have the rest in candy. Well, you wouldn't believe how much you could buy for a dozen of eggs.

So you got a lot of candy?

Didn't get much candy. No, maybe a nickel's worth.

Ah, really, okay.

But that was all in a day's work. We had to go to the store and we got the eggs. I mean, you know, people, we grew everything, you know. We didn't go to the store and buy milk and all that stuff. We had everything that anybody needs, vegetables and milk and butter and.... You know how to make butter?

No, no idea.

Well, that could go into a long story. [chuckles] Very interesting. So anyhow, we had our own meats, like pork and beef and all that stuff. And we grew our vegetables, any kind of vegetable you can imagine. And then we canned vegetables. We picked berries. And there was all kinds of berries. What they call blue berries now we called huckleberries.

Huckleberries?

Yep. So we grew all that stuff. So it was really a good life. And I grew up poor, but I didn't know it. I realize now, you know, but everybody's advanced.

Oh, that's true.

So, everybody was poor back then. But we were all happy. We didn't have to lock our doors.

So you more or less grew up on a farm?

Yes, mmm-hmm.

**So did your parents have a lot of farm help?
Meaning, did you have a lot of brothers and
sisters? [laughing lightly]**

Honey, there was nine in my family.

Nine!

And I'm the youngest one.

Oh, are you?

So, yes, and my brother, Glen, Glen Smith, who was Okay, he was uh, he was next to me. He was three years older than me, and I'm not saying how old I am! [laughing] I won't tell. If you read Goldenseal Magazine, I bet you'll find out.

So are you....Glen is at Goldenseal.

...Glen Smith and he's my brother. And he lived in uh, well it was twenty miles a piece, twenty miles out of Parkersburg, Mineral Springs is where he lived. Mmm-hmm.

So you played music with Glen? Right?

Yes, unfortunately I did.

Why unfortunately?

Well, sometimes it was pretty tiring. Because when you're playing for a dance or you know, playing something like, I mean, well, any time you're playing with a fiddle player, there's a work involved and you get really, really tired, you know, playing fiddle. I don't know if you've ever done that or not.....

Mm-huh.

...but it's a whole lot different.

I imagine.

But it's more like work.

So when...when and how did you start to play music?

Well, my father played a banjo.

Mmm-hmm.

And I'd go to sleep at night listening to him playing old time tunes, like uh, "May I Sleep in your Barn Tonight, Mister", that was a real old tune. "Old Joe Clark", "Ragtime Annie", I can just think of a lot of the real old tunes, you know. And I'd listen to him playing that banjo 'til I went to sleep.

Really?

And see, we didn't have a living room. I mean, we had a...it was like a bedroom, I mean. The bedroom and living room combined. And we had this wood stove. And I can just see him sittin' there pattin' his foot and playing his banjo when I was just a kid. And uh, but anyway. Like I said, there was no radio and no t.v., of course. But later we did get a battery radio. And that was great! Because then we could listen to...there was a program called the Suppertime Frolic and I don't know if you've ever heard of that and uh, let's see...Louisiana Hayride, that was another one. And I can just think of a lot of them. But the old ones like Charley Monroe and Bill Monroe, I mean, they were brothers. And they were known then as the Monroe Brothers [bluegrass]. And the Carter Family, the real old timers that I got to hear on that battery radio.

So it was Bluegrass and old timey music?

Mainly old time, old time music.

Did that influence your guitar playing?

Well, yes. Of course, my father, I was listening to him before I ever got my guitar. That influenced me a lot because I knew these old time hymns just by hearing them over and over.

So you, you mentioned to me earlier, how you started to learn how to play the guitar. Can you....

Well, to tell you the truth, I didn't have any teacher at all. I mean, I just kind of learned myself. My sister knew three chords. Well, I mean, you know, you can play a tune with three chords, if the tune's not too complicated. [chuckling] But uh, I had...yeah, she taught me three chords. And from there on, she never did, she didn't pursue music at all. And so anyway, my brother bought a guitar and he got a violin and he wanted me to play, of course, he needed some backup. So that's how I got started. I was twelve when I got my first guitar. And I think about year later we were asked to play at parties and stuff.

Parties?

Yes. Now the parties back then, Amber, like they might have two rooms, where the band would be in one room and then roll the rug back and you would dance in the other room. Yeah, that's how the parties was that day, you know. I mean, there was no electrical stuff, not like electricity and stuff, you know. You just had your banjo, guitar and fiddle and that was pretty much the band.

Really?!

Yeah.

So how did electricity change all that?

Well, course you know, when you've got electricity, well, the electricity didn't really change our bluegrass and old time music, because you don't play electric bass, you know, in bluegrass.

Right.

The drums and the bass, I mean, I don't remember what year that came. But anyhow, the drums and bass has really the sound. Because the Osborne Brothers, see, they use electric now. And uh, used to, it was just acoustic. All together acoustic...in any of the bands.

So...you were in a band, the Dixie Ramblers?

Yes, the Dixie Ramblers. Uh-huh.

So how did you progress from playing parties and dance halls with Glen, to the Dixie Ramblers?

The Dixie Ramblers? Well, when me and my husband married, now, Glen, he married first. And after he got married, uh, I was engaged. Would you like to hear about that?

Mmm-hmm.

I was engaged. I was engaged to this brown-eyed guy, you know. And to my advantage, I mean, the band manager told me he was going to bring somebody down and meet me. And I told him, I said, "Well, okay, go ahead. But I'm engaged." So he brought Clinton Rowe, stage name was Toby. He brought him down to meet me, but the brown-eyed man that I was engaged to, he didn't have music on his mind. He went on to the movies. So later on, and like I say, we were engaged. He went to Maryland to get a job, because there was no money, I mean, not even for the ring. And we were engaged to get married. But, while he was gone to Maryland, uh, I kind of got tired of holding my guitar! [chuckling] So anyway, I sat out under my favorite apple tree, and I played that guitar, you know. So finally letters just kept coming from Maryland, but letters have no arms. So when my manager brought Toby Rowe down to meet me, we started dating. And so then, I had to write that "Dear John" letter, and it was so hard for me to do. And I knew I couldn't tell him in person. So I wrote the letter to Maryland,

said I was getting married. And so, I married Toby Lowe. I was twenty and he was twenty-seven. So uh, am I boring you?

NO! [laughing] Are you kidding?! No, no, no.

But anyhow, and at that time, I mean, you know, uh, well, in fact, we're about in the same kind of time. Because we got war again. This was World War II. And the night, the very first night that we were together, my band manager took the rest of the band home first and left me and Toby in the park. And there was a blackout. See, used to they had these...it was because of the war there were blackouts, you know, in certain towns. So they had a blackout that night. And it left me and him sitting on the park bench together and I was scared to death, because he was a big man. So we have, we had the blackout that night. And so, the band manager, when he came back to pick me up, he said he knew I was in good hands. He knew that I'd be okay. But anyhow, that was the beginning. And then like I said, there was a lot of music, theaters, courthouses..... You see, we didn't have auditoriums like we've got now, you know, the coliseums and all that stuff. We played at school houses, court houses, and theaters.

So is there any event when you played with the Ramblers that sticks out in your mind?

Oh, my, there's a lot! [laughing] Like one time we were playing in the court house, and I was wearing crinolines, petticoats. Well, the petticoats, I don't know what you...I don't know if you know what a crinoline petticoat is.

Uh-huh.

Well, it was a bee. See, we were in the judges chambers. And there was a bee that got up my, in my petticoat and was whizzing around in there and it scared me to death. So I ran into the judges chambers, you know. So I ran in there right quick to get that bee. So I slipped off that petticoat real quick, I never did find the bee. And I mean, I

didn't know if it had went out or what happened. But I didn't have time enough to really go searching for the bee and I had to go on back out. And just as I got out they said, "Let's make welcome the Dixie Ramblers". And needless to say I wasn't too relaxed and I still wondered about the bee.

So you never found that bee?

I never found that bee. And I tell you what, that was kind of scary, because I just knew that bee was there still in my petticoat.
[laughing]

Was there anything else that sticks out in your mind?

Well, yes, there's a lot of things, Amber, I mean, that has happened....uh, through the years. I mean, one time I got stuck.... The concession stands at these drive-in theaters, they usually use for stage, you know. So one time all the bands had gone out on the stage. There was this little old window, little cut out thing, little window. And we all had to get on stage. But I had my guitar strapped on my back. So I got, all the band members and the manager and everybody was on stage. But I couldn't get forward and I couldn't go backward, because I was stuck with my guitar in that little window. So finally, somebody came over there to help me get out of there. And then I did that song, "Somewhere between, there's a window that I can't get through". Oh, there's been so many things that's happened.

Have you ever played for anybody reputable?

that stood out in my memory. That was in 1957. Uh, well, yes, a lot of times. But one thing that stands out in my memory. We played for the Queen of England, and that was in 1957. And she was listing the states. We had, we had played at Independence, Virginia--we played for a dance. I mean, that was really hard work. We played for the dance, then after the dance, we left and we drove to Jamestown. And I was exhausted, needless to say, after that dance.

But anyway, they had a house there for us. And uh, that was the first time I had ever seen a ferry. I wasn't too concerned about the King, or the Queen, but I was really concerned about that ferry. I'd never seen one! [laughing] So anyway, we had to drive our car up on that ferry, and the band had to get out of the car and stand beside of the car. And so we, we got out and the wind was blowing and it was just beautiful, you know. My beautician had gone with us, so she got to do my hair before I saw the queen. But that was a big thing.

Did the Queen like you?

Well, I don't know. You know what? I doubt if she hardly even knew what our Bluegrass music was. But at that time, Governor Stanley, I don't know if you've ever heard of him, unless in history you had, because this happened in '57. But Governor Stanley was standing next to my husband. And they were talking about the four-string guitar that my husband was playing. And it was [inaudible]... And so then we were really surprised. Because see, we'd just been sitting there talking to him, you know, and just not knowing who he was and then they introduced Governor Stanley and the guy got up who was sitting next to us. And I mean, you know...[chuckling]...that was kind of a surprise to us because we didn't know who we were talking to. It doesn't make any difference to me, Amber. You know, I talk to people from all walks of life.

Oh, yeah.

And it just, you know, I just never met a stranger. A stranger is someone who's just a friend I've never met. You know, like you?

Thank you! There's a lot to ask. There's a lot to ask. So let's go to the character of Aunt Martha, that you portrayed.

Okay, well, that happened in 1940. I started doing commercials. And I just, you know, wanted to do something that was going to be funny.

And it is funny. [light laughter]

So apparently, it got their attention. Everybody seemed to like Aunt Martha.

I can see how.

But anyway, I had a lot of fun being Aunt Martha. Yeah, I wrote commercials. And I always wrote my own; nobody could have written for Aunt Martha.

Well, so, how has...how did you come up with her character? Did you just decide you were going to do it one day?

Uh, yeah. I just, you know, I started in advertising used cars. That was the first commercial I ever did—car fever. That was the name of that commercial. But anyway, I started advertising used cars, then I went to the chicken and I mean, different things. I mean, it was just, you know [inaudible].... But the first commercial I ever did was car fever.

Mmmh. So did the music that you played throughout your life shape Aunt Martha in any way?

Uh, well, yeah, Aunt Martha had her own way of [inaudible].... But yeah, it all kind of, you know, it was all combined. Because see, like I said, I mean, you know...okay, like at the Civic Center in Roanoke, I had this old fiddle. And I didn't play the fiddle. But this was a live show and I didn't, I didn't use the fiddle to play, but I had my notes on the back of that fiddle. So Aunt Martha, she just came out there, you know, and it was [inaudible]..... So she came out with her notes on the back of the fiddle, but nobody knew but what I was gonna play that fiddle. So it was a prop.

Ahhhh. Well, what do you want people to see when you're Aunt Martha? What do you want people to get out of her?

Oh, I tell you what. Really Aunt Martha is just inside me. [laughing] It's just me. I mean, you know..... People thought I was acting like Aunt Martha, but Aunt Martha was acting like Maude.

I see what you're saying, I see what you're saying. So, what do you think is going on with old timer Bluegrass music right now? Is there any kind of project you're working on right now?

Been promoting [inaudible]...she's in country music. Been promoting her. But no, I'm not playing music for the public. But I will say this, Bluegrass music is coming back around, you know. It did die for awhile, but it is coming back fast.

And how do you feel about that?

I like it.

You like it?

Yes.

So you think that the young people who are playing Bluegrass nowadays are doing it justice?

Oh, yes, yes. Someone like Rhonda Vincent—I don't know if you're familiar with her—but uh, Martha White Flour Company just bought her a new bus. And she's really going to.....mmm-hmm.

Good! So what do you want to see come out of old-timey Bluegrass music?

Oh, I just hope it comes back. Because I mean, you know, the roots of our music came from Ireland, and I think we have some beautiful stuff, you know, that originated in Ireland. It goes way back to the 20s. In my hometown...have you heard the Stoneham Family?

No.

Well, Pop Stoneham, he's from our hometown. And I'm sure a lot of the people have heard, well from my hometown. And they were into old time, and I mean, I'm talking about real old time music, because that was in the 20s. And uh, I think there was twenty-three children in that family. Can you imagine?

Oh, my God. [laughing with surprise]

Yes. Twenty-three children. And they all played music. So they're from [inaudible].... There's so many, many really good musicians that came out of I'd say a hundred mile radius of around here. Like [inaudible]...West Virginia. I mean, it's amazing.

Well, what is it that makes old time music old time music?

What is it?

Mmm-hmm.

Well, that shows, Amber, you're too young.

Yeah, exactly! Exactly. How, how would I identify it from your description?

Well, let's put it this way. Old time music, what kind of old time music have you been exposed to? Something like "She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain"?

Right.

Okay, well, old time music mainly like a fiddle or a banjo. It can be done with a fiddle or banjo. A lot of old-timers used to do just that. Or it can be a five piece band. But old time music was, I guess, well, I'm talking about way back in the 20s. [inaudible].... And the Carter Family and oh, there was a host of them that started out way back in the 20s. And that is old time. Now, people skimp on adding instruments. Of course, they change, they wrote their own songs and stuff. But it all goes back to old time Bluegrass music. It just, you know, people just have different ways playing.

So you would say that, that's something you could readily identify, old timer Bluegrass music with, is like a banjo?

Yeah, a banjo and fiddle is the main thing. A banjo and fiddle.

And so, just the rest of the instruments in the ensemble kind of accompany the banjo and fiddle?

Right, yeah, yeah. Because used to it would just be uh, I mean, you know, maybe a banjo and a fiddle.

So do you think that came from Celtic music in Ireland?

Uh, the tunes that I'm talking about

is Irish, are Irish tunes. Like "Danny Boy".

"Danny Boy".

That's a real old one. And I mean,

See, I'm not familiar with tunes like "Old Joe Clark". So all that comes from....

Yeah, that's the old time stuff.

Really?

Sure it is.

Okay. How would you compare the way that you were brought up to what you know about a coal camp upbringing?

The way that a coal camp...?

Right. Do you think that they are comparable just as far as the level of poverty, music being a form of entertainment, rather than....?

Yes. It's just that the [inaudible]...different. We were farmers and.... But I mean, like I said, you know, you sold your vegetables and meats and stuff, and you raised everything you eat. And uh, but I mean, I think it's the same thing in West Virginia. And I mean, we just had coal [inaudible].... And so I guess....but basically, growing up poor is growing up poor, I don't care where you are.

Right, right. There are a lot of similarities.

That's right, yeah.

That's true.

If you're poor, you're poor. But the main thing was, I didn't know it. I mean, now that I look back on it, I wasn't. I was wealthy. I had my health and I had my parents. And I mean, you know, we had plenty to eat and plenty to wear and that's all anybody needs.

Right. So is there anything, within growing up in a coal camp, you're oppressed a lot by the governing body of the coal camp, the people that issue the paychecks. Do you think that you escape that by being raised in an agricultural family, that was pretty self-sufficient?

Probably so, probably so.

Which is good!

Yes. But I don't really know that much about coal camps.

Right. So....

Although I do have a nephew, he's retired now. He was a mine inspector.

Ah. Anywhere around here?

Red Jacket, West Virginia.

Red Jacket, West Virginia. Mmh. So, so there definitely are a lot of similarities between.... Mainly in the fact that music in the coal camps, I mean, like you said, there...there was not much else to do. You didn't have a t.v.

Right.

....that, that was recreational, in a lot of ways. But it also ended up being one of *the* main aspects of your life. So how...how did that come about? What made you decide to be a musician?

Didn't have much choice. [laughing]

Really? Really?

No, really, my brother was really insisting on me playing guitar. And of course, my father played a banjo. And I mean, it seemed to be the thing to do.

Right. It's really, not that it strikes me as odd, but in a lot of the research I've done, especially with people my age, and rural places like West Virginia, Virginia, uh, Kentucky, even now. A lot of families really frown upon their children going into music as a career, rather than just recreation. That coal camp mentality of music isn't your life, but it's a necessary part of your life just kind of stuck. So were your parents supportive...?

Well, yes, of course, because my father played a banjo.

Really? So there was never any question about, you know, you guys need to grow crops or put it in the coal mines?

No, never, no never had a conflict.

So looking back on your years as a musician, how do you view it now?

I'm really glad. I mean, I'm glad I was in it. Because, see, if I hadn't been, I wouldn't have had all the friends that I have now. And I mean, I have got lots and lots of friends. You wouldn't believe. I just now met another one...Amber.

Well, thank you. I would believe it from your personality. Definitely.

But I do, I appreciate all my friends. And I wouldn't have known these people had I not been in music. So if I had been raised like [inaudible]... twenty-three children [inaudible]...that's for sure.

Yes, pretty much. So being a seasoned guitar expert, what type of advice do you have a young guitar player who's looking to get in to old time music?

Into old time music?

Mmm-hmm.

Well, I think the thing to do is, someone your age, the main thing is to just listen to it, old time music. I mean, you know, you can find it if you want to go way back, you can find it in the library or just wherever. But uh, I mean, listen to a lot of it. And then you will know. Because see, it's kind of hard. It'd be hard for me to go into Orchestra, you know? Because, like I said, I grew up listening to it.

So one of the...one of the things that impressed me about you outright when I found you and made me want to interview you, is that coming up, that I played more rock music, even growing up in West Virginia, than a lot of old timer Bluegrass music. And I've caught a lot of flack from a lot of men growing up for being a guitar player.

Oh, really?

So did you ever experience that in any way?

No, I sure didn't.

Not at all?

No.

Do you think that's because....

Maybe in the rock music, maybe....

Right. But it doesn't matter in old time music, you're saying?

No, uh-huh. Everybody enjoyed the music. Well, you've probably heard of the Carter family, Mother Mabelle? Okay, well, you see, that was a family thing, the Stoner Family, that was a family thing, too. And I mean, it was just, you know, it was just something that you did, I mean, that you enjoyed. And you wasn't really expecting a lot of money, you know. It wasn't a job. It was something that you enjoyed doing. And you did...you did it for entertainment. But there wasn't a lot of money either.

Right. So you're saying the rock star mentality about music applies to rock and not to old time music?

Definitely. Yes, old time music. I mean, you know, rock would certainly be boring. [laughter]

That's good though. Well, I don't really have anything else to ask for the first session. So is there anything you wanted to throw in or any additional thoughts?

No, but I mean, if I were your age, I would pursue what you're doing. Because you're doing a good job.

Yeah, I kinda worry because I pursued it academically, rather than listening to it, which a lot of people have, because it's going to hurt me a little bit. But I think you're right, just listen to it.

Yes, that's really what you have to do.

Well, anything else?

No, thank you.

Well, thank you!

END OF INTERVIEW
